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C O N F I D E N T I A L ADDIS ABABA 000898

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2019

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: COURT ORDERS VISITATION RIGHTS FOR BIRTUKAN;
PRISON REFUSES ACCESS

REF: A. ADDIS 594 (AND PREVIOUS)

[B](#). ADDIS 877

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) On Wednesday April 15 the Federal First Instance Court ordered the Kaliti prison administration to respect Birtukan's constitutional right to be visited by family members, friends, religious figures, and her lawyer. However, when Deputy Chairman of Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) Yacob Hailemariam and other members of the UDJ executive committee attempted to visit Birtukan on Saturday April 18, they were denied access. Prison officials said that they had not yet received a court order granting visitor access. The court rejected Birtukan's lawyer's request to release her from solitary confinement. The lawyer plans to appeal.

[2](#). (C) The Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief met with Ms. Almaz Gebre-Egzabhier, mother of incarcerated opposition leader Birtukan Midekssa, for a second time on April 15 (Ref. A). Ms. Almaz reported that Birtukan continues to be held in solitary confinement, and that she is only allowed to see her mother and four year old daughter. Birtukan's brother attempted to visit her last month, but was repeatedly denied access. Prison guards continue to supervise Ms. Almaz's visits and allow the two only to exchange greetings. Ms. Almaz said that her daughter is in good health, and that she is allowed to read some censored reading materials. Ms. Almaz is unsure whether Birtukan will be moved to Zewai prison, whose distance several hours from Addis Ababa would make it difficult to continue her frequent visits.

[3](#). (C) Embassy staff has recently raised the issue of Birtukan's release with the Prime Minister, the Director General for Europe and the Americas within the Foreign Ministry, and the Minister of Justice. While we continue to push for her release, we are also encouraging visitation rights for her lawyer and others, release from solitary confinement, and keeping Birtukan at Kaliti prison instead of moving her to the more distant Zewai prison. UDJ staged a peaceful public demonstration in Addis Ababa on April 16, calling for the release of Birtukan (Ref. B). While it is encouraging that this marked the first political demonstration since the aftermath of the 2005 elections, the government holds firm in its decision to not release Birtukan. In light of the recent court order allowing visitation rights, EmbOff will attempt to visit Birtukan soon.
YAMAMOTO